



The Doctor - From painting to figurine

Mc Hugh, C. (2020). The Doctor - From painting to figurine. The Asahi Shimbun.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/01/2020

Document Version

Author Accepted version

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The Doctor – From Painting to Figurine

Sir Luke Fildes' painting, *The Doctor* (1891), depicts a Victorian general practitioner sitting vigil over a sick boy, while his distraught parents are shown helpless in the background. Commissioned by Sir Henry Tate in 1890, the painting was offered as a gift to the nation in 1897 and now forms part of the Tate's collection of British Art. Soon after its first display at the Royal Academy, it was reproduced as an engraving by Agnew's, selling over one million copies in the USA alone.

In the time of an incurable coronavirus, this portrayal of patient-centred medical diligence and compassion seems more prescient and relevant than ever. When *The Doctor* was painted, modern scientific medicine was in its infancy. The National Health Service, Britain's unprecedented Post-War project to provide free health care for all, would not be established for another 57 years. While the Victorian period saw many advances in medical science, access to treatment at this time depended largely upon one's wealth and social class. Indeed, it is unlikely, yet not inconceivable, that a Victorian doctor would have visited the impoverished cottage shown in the idealised painting. This was before the advent of antibiotics and antiviral drugs. Having exhausted all options for treatment, all Fildes' doctor can do is sit in hope at the boy's side.

Today, doctors and nurses in NHS hospitals across Britain are faced with a similar sense of helplessness in the face of a formidable adversary. With no viable drug treatment and scarce supplies of personal protective equipment, care for critical Covid-19 patients sometimes must seem like an act of faith as much as an application of scientific method. *The Doctor* reminds us of the age-old necessity for compassionate care and the importance of a mutually empathetic relationship between medical professionals and their patients.

Just as Fildes presents his doctor as a romanticised and self-less hero, doctors, nurses and other essential workers in Britain today are being portrayed in the press as foot soldiers in a titanic struggle against darkness and chaos. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, himself afflicted by coronavirus, described the NHS as Britain's 'beating heart', invoking wartime rhetoric to 'enlist' us in the fight. With routine operations and procedures suspended, the NHS has become a gargantuan coronavirus treatment machine. Taking on the appearance of an almost quasi-religious entity, the doctors and nurses have become martyrs who are beyond criticism or rebuke. Every Thursday night at 8pm, people across Britain venture out of their front doors to clap for the NHS in a heartwarming, yet disturbing, ritual of communal gratitude.

What would *The Doctor* look like if Fildes painted it today? For a start, the doctor would be wearing a gown, gloves, visor and mask (but only if he could get his hands on them!). Instead of a child, there would most likely be an older person attached to a ventilator. The mother and father, whose anguish is an important aspect of the original, would not be allowed near the hospital for fear of transmission. Saying goodbye to a dying relative digitally through Facetime or similar, while a nurse holds their hand, is becoming the so-called 'new normal'.

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Chris McHugh

Accepted Author Manuscript

That Fildes' painting was reinterpreted as a ceramic novelty figurine by designers and craftspeople in Seto some 45 years ago shows the enduring and universal appeal of its message. It also testifies to the breadth of Seto's manufacturing knowhow, where the whole gamut of Western visual and popular culture was reimagined in affordable ceramic forms for the export market. This process of transformation from a Victorian painting and engraving into a mass-produced three dimensional ceramic figurine also demonstrates Seto's Post-War global outlook and agility. This is an extraordinary journey of imagination across culture and time, linking commissioners, designers, and individual crafts people. As a British ceramicist who has spent much time in Seto, I am acutely aware of the range of high level skills involved in realising such a piece.

A visit to the sample store of Seto's ceramics factories will reveal serried ranks of novelty figurines of all shapes and sizes, languishing in the dark and dust as silent embodiments of human endeavour, tacit skill and global capitalism. The discovery of The Doctor figurine in this store shows the importance of this archive, as well as the vital nature of the work of the Seto Novelty Culture Preservation Society in attempting to preserve this shared history. Who knows when these novelties will emerge from the dark, acquiring new resonance and relevance in the face of world events? Speaking selfishly, I cannot wait until the coronavirus subsides and I am able to visit Seto again to meet my friends and explore this important heritage site further.

Not only does The Doctor figurine carry the original caring message of the painting, its rediscovery as a novelty figurine in Seto also shows us the importance of global collaboration and understanding in an era when local and national interests are being prioritized. While self-isolation may become the 'new-normal' for the foreseeable future, the story of Seto's novelty industry teaches us this is not a time to retreat from the world. While the globalization which facilitated Seto's success may have contributed to this pandemic, it can only be solved through local action guided by a global vision.

The British government and public would do well to reacquaint themselves with Fildes' painting. The Doctor was painted at a time when advances in medicine were being questioned by Romanticism's scepticism of science and its belief in the primacy of the individual. Today, we find ourselves bereft and humbled by nature. In a world where the President of the USA is promoting quack cures over science, and libertarians are advocating individual freedom and economic gain over communal safety, we need Fildes' message more than ever. Speaking from a Post-Brexit Britain, governed by free-market zealots where everything is for sale, The Doctor reminds us to resist a return to a Victorian dark age where access to medicine is seen as a commodity rather than a fundamental human right.



The Doctor figurine made in Seto in 1974.

First published in Japanese in the Asahi Shimbun 10.06.2020

https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN686259N64OIP00L.html?iref=pc_ss_date_article

Later translated and published in English in the Asahi Shimbun 17.07.2020

<http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13511945>